



November 3, 2002 - Statement of His Eminence Bernard Cardinal Law - Cathedral of the Holy Cross

(see the RealPlayer video of the Cardinal's statement with comments by Barbara Thorpe courtesy of BCTV.)

Earlier this week, I was privileged and blessed to meet with a truly inspiring group of people who had been sexually abused as children by a priest. They had invited me to join them and their family members and friends who gathered with them as they continued their own efforts to deal with the devastating effects of the abuse they endured. That meeting, although difficult and painful at times, was truly an occasion of grace for me and, I hope and pray, for all of those with whom I gathered. It was suggested during our time together that it would be good for me to address, more publicly and frequently, a number of issues which came up in the course of our time together. After all, there are many other people who have been abused by other priests. I told them that I would be willing to do just that. What follows now is a sincere attempt to honor the spirit of our meeting. I am indeed indebted to all of those who contributed so much by their presence, words and actions earlier this week.

It almost seems like an eternity away, yet it was in January of this year that the crisis of sexual abuse of children by clergy began to dominate our consciousness. Ten months later, I stand before you with a far deeper awareness of this terrible evil than I had at that time. No one who has not experienced sexual abuse as a child can fully comprehend the devastating effects of this horrible sin. Nor is it possible for someone else to comprehend the degree of pain, of confusion, of self doubt, and or anger that a mother or father feels with the knowledge that her child, that his child, has been sexually abused by a priest. Who can know the burden of a wife or husband of someone who was abused as a child?

I do not pretend to fully comprehend the devastating consequences of the sexual abuse of children. Over these past ten months, however, I have been focused in a singular way on this evil and on what it has done to the lives of so many. As I have listened personally to the stories of men and women who have endured such abuse, I have learned that some of these consequences include lifelong struggles with alcohol and drug abuse, depression, difficulty in maintaining relationships and, sadly, even suicide. It is impossible to think of an act of sexual abuse of a child in isolation. There is inevitably a ripple effect from this evil act which spreads out and touches the lives of all of us. Clearly, these evil acts have touched our life together as an Archdiocese. Our relationships have been damaged. Trust has been broken.

When I was a young man I was profoundly influenced by different priests. They represented all that was good to me. During my high school years, Father Mark Knoll, a Redemptorist priest, was a great mentor. During my college years, Bishop Lawrence J. Riley and Father Joseph Collins made a lasting impact on my life. Like countless others, I placed great trust in them.

One of the insidious consequences of the sexual abuse of a child by a priest is the rupturing of that sacred trust. For some victim-survivors, not only is it difficult to trust priests again, but the Church herself is mistrusted. Many victim-survivors and their family members find it impossible to continue to live out their lives as Catholics, or even to enter a Catholic church building.

Once again I want to acknowledge publicly my responsibility for decisions which I now see were clearly wrong. While I would hope that it would be understood that I never intended to place a priest in a position where I felt he would be a risk to children, the fact of the matter remains that I did assign priests who had committed sexual abuse. Our policy does not allow this now, and I am convinced that this is the only correct policy. Yet in the past, however well intentioned, I made assignments which I now recognize were wrong. With all my heart I apologize for this, once again.

Apology in and of itself is not sufficient. I hope that the efforts that have already been made and which are in process in this Archdiocese to insure the protection of children as we move forward will serve as a motive to accept my apology.

Today, however, I would also ask forgiveness. I address myself to all the faithful. Particularly do I ask forgiveness of those who have been abused, and of their parents and other family members. I acknowledge my own responsibil-



ity for decisions which led to intense suffering. While that suffering was never intended, it could have been avoided had I acted differently. I see this now with a clarity that has been heightened through the experience of these past ten months.

I ask forgiveness in my name and in the name of those who served before me. We turn first to God for the forgiveness we need. We must, however, also beg forgiveness of one another. The dynamics of the evil of sexual abuse of children are very complex, and can often generate deep shame within those who have been abused. There are times, strangely enough, when those who have been abused wonder whether they themselves were to blame, and there are times when their parents are plagued with self doubt about the manner in which they exercised their own parental responsibilities. I would want to say a word to such survivors and to such parents. Realize that the sexual abuse of a child by an adult is an act of exploitation. When the abuser is a priest, it is a profound violation of a sacred trust. In order to experience healing from the pain and all the sad consequences of such abuse, it is necessary to recognize that the blame lies with the perpetrator.

For us as a community of faith, forgiveness is always seen in the context of the forgiving, reconciling love of God made manifest by the cross of Christ. Christ draws us to Himself and draws us closer to one another. For whatever wrong we have done we turn to God for forgiveness, even as we extend forgiveness to one another. The forgiving love of God gives me the courage to beg forgiveness of those who have suffered because of what I did. As I beg your forgiveness, I pledge my unyielding efforts to insure that this will never happen again.

Finally, once again I urge all those who live with the awful secret of sexual abuse by clergy or by anyone else to come forward so that you may begin to experience healing. The resources of the Archdiocese through the Office of Healing and Assistance Ministry are available to you. I am happy to see that Mrs. Barbara Thorp, Director of that office, is present. Obviously, anyone with knowledge about past abuse should make this information available to appropriate public authorities. No one is helped by keeping such things secret. The secret of sexual abuse needs to be brought out of the darkness and into the healing light of Jesus Christ.

Copyright © 2004-2006 Archdiocese of Boston; all rights reserved